

AFRICAN ART

The Toledo Museum of Art

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A WOOT HEADRESS

made by the Kuba People of Zaire

The Headress

Intended to cover the wearer's head, this colorful headress or helmet mask was easy to distinguish in ceremonial dances. It was traditionally worn during the final dance at male initiation ceremonies to symbolize the mythical hero Woot. These rituals were intended to initiate adolescent boys into the status of manhood and full participation in the adult life of the community.

Stretching over a frame woven of raffia palm fibers, the leopard-skin face is richly ornamented. Geometric patterns of white, black, and ocher beads define the eyes, ears, and mouth. A thin vertical strip of cloth, strung with alternating rows of ocher and black beads, covers the carved wood nose as it descends from the forehead. Cowrie shells and more beads—including red ones—weave in and out along the sides and back of the head. Palm stalk fragments at the base of the mask add to the ornamental effect and indicate where the rest of the costume would attach.

The tubular superstructure probably represents an elephant trunk, which, like the rest of the headress, is encrusted with beads and cowrie shells. Because the elephant is a royal emblem for the Kuba, this headress may only be worn by men of royal descent. The trunk itself symbolizes royal power; cowrie shells indicate wealth; and the leopard skin reflects the strength and courage of the hero. In performance, the trunk reinforces the authority of the king, Woot's descendent, and instills respect for the law, which states that all property and power is transmitted through women.

Who Was Woot?

The mythical hero Woot was responsible for originating the Kuba royal line, organizing the political structure, and introducing most of the arts and crafts.

Legend has it that Woot, the first Kuba ancestor, traveled from the Ubangi territory to what is today Zaire, where he settled near the Sankuru and Kasai rivers. One day, as he lay naked on the ground after drinking too much palm wine, his sons began to mock him. His daughter (according to some, his sister) approached him modestly and covered him. Woot rewarded her by promising that all of his heirs would be borne only by her. He punished his sons by making them submit to rites of initiation into manhood.



Zaire, Kuba People

Cup, wood, 1880–1910

The Toledo Museum of Art, 1991.55

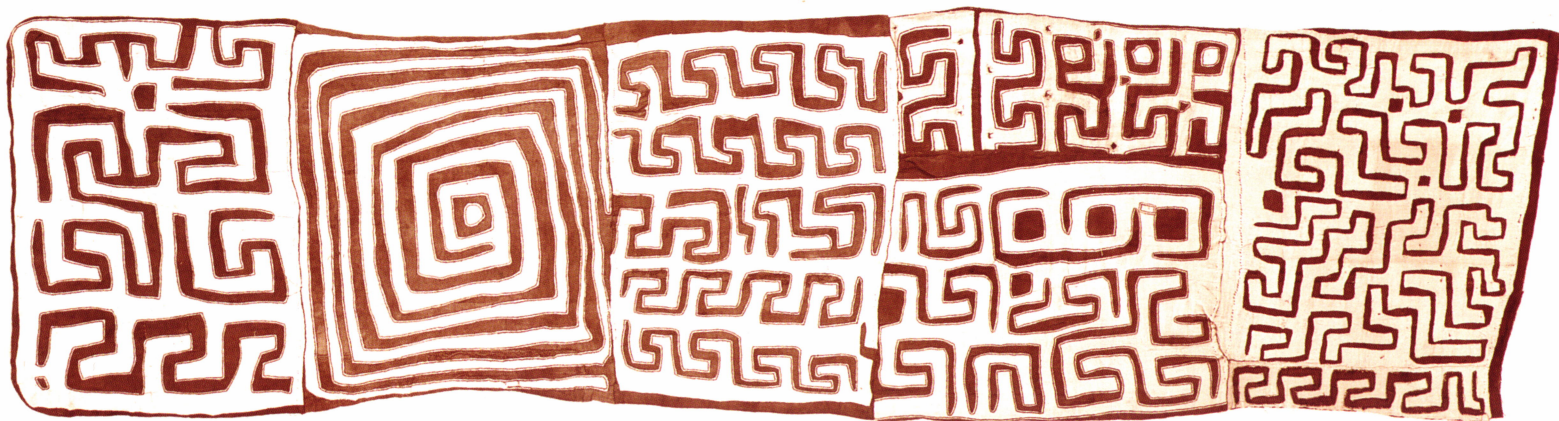
The Kuba People

The Kuba people, also called Bakuba (meaning "people of lightning"), live in central Zaire, where eighteen small groups comprise a larger organization known as the Kuba Federation, dominated by the Bushongo group ("people of the throwing knife"). While unified politically, these groups all have different historical backgrounds and speak different varieties of Bantu languages. Each group is ruled by a chief and two or three councils that represent different classes and professions within the general population, including the so-called noble clans.

The ruling Bushongo chief is king of the federation by divine right, and his army has been a unifying factor since the emergence of the federation around 1600. The hierarchy of gods (supreme leaders), the king and chiefs (in charge of all social, political, and religious systems), the system of councils, and a head judge, who settles all disputes within the community, constitute the Kuba social organization. Almost all traditional customs within Kuba society are a result of the actions of the numerous kings: throughout history, at least 124 kings made significant contributions to Kuba development as a whole.

Unlike other African peoples, Kuba do not practice ancestor worship; they believe in one supreme being, but only worship nature spirits called *ngesh*. Witch-finding associations came into existence after poison-drinking rituals to test witchcraft suspects had been barred by 1930. The latter have persisted, however.

Kuba economy is based primarily on hunting and agriculture. Nearly all objects of daily use are decorated, and carved wooden figurines, initiation masks, cups, and raffia cloth are especially prized export articles. The Kuba also have rich music, dance, and oral literature traditions.



Zaire, Kuba People

Textile, raffia-palm fiber; 1875–1900
The Toledo Museum of Art, 1977.73

For Discussion

- ◆ The artist who made this headdress combined a number of different materials. Why do you think he chose to do this instead of simply carving the headdress out of wood in the way many other African headdresses are made?
- ◆ How has the artist used curved and angular forms in this headdress?
- ◆ Did the Kuba believe that their ancestor Woot looked like this headdress? If not, why did they represent him in this way?
- ◆ Do you consider this headdress to be beautiful? Why or why not? What is the difference between creating a work of art that represents something beautiful and creating a work that is beautifully made?
- ◆ If this object was made for a ceremony, what other artistic elements might have accompanied it during the ceremony? How is the life of a ceremonial object different from the life of an everyday object?

Bibliography

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Curriculum Activities

Art

Use heavy paper, rolled into a large tube with semi-circular cut-outs to fit over shoulders, as the supporting structure to make headdresses representing contemporary heroes, known or imagined. Build up the surface with papier mâché and other materials, such as beads, feathers, sticks, and dried plants. Incorporate painted designs. Add costume elements. Think about how various materials, forms, and designs might be symbolic of heroic qualities. Make up stories about the various heroes represented.

Drama

Bring the headdresses and costumes to life by acting out the stories of the heroes using movement and mime, while the story is told by a narrator. Accompany the performance with rhythm instruments.

Language Arts

African folktales often end with a question that sparks discussion among the listeners and brings them into active participation in solving the moral dilemmas of the society. Write stories about good and bad behavior that end with a question rather than a conclusion. Share the stories and discuss the various opinions of the listeners.

Social Studies

Divide into teams to research the history, geography, economy, and social life of Zaire. Each team can make a presentation to the class that includes maps, charts, drawings, dramatic scenes, and so on.

Mathematics

The Woot headdress features geometric tessellations—designs based on repeating elements that fit together like the pieces of a mosaic. One of these designs forms the background to this poster. It is created on a grid of squares in which each square is bisected horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. Draw such grids and re-create the design from the poster. Then use the same grid to create a different repeating pattern. Ask students to find a strip of the background pattern that is used in the bead work of the Woot headdress.

Museum Visit

A visit to The Toledo Museum of Art will help students compare the Woot Headdress to other works of African art and the art of other cultures. Search for how other African peoples combined different materials to create a work of art. What elements in these works seem to be symbolic? Look for such "mixed-media" works made by other cultures throughout the Museum.

Which works in the African Gallery were used for ceremonial purposes? Compare these to ceremonial works in the Egyptian collection nearby and to the works of medieval European art found in the Cloister in the West Wing.

For information about African art and to borrow classroom materials, visit the Museum's Community Learning Resource Center near the School Tour Entrance. Further information is available in the Art Reference Library in the University of Toledo Center for the Visual Arts, adjacent to the Museum. Both facilities can be contacted by calling (419) 255-8000.

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Permit 86
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Zaire, Kuba people

Headdress (Woot)

Raffia, wood, beads, shells, leopard skin, palm fibers, 1875–1900

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Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey

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